



# The power of conflict coaching

People problems are time-consuming, energy-sapping and often hard to resolve. What's more, they can have a profound effect on an organisation's bottom line. But with the right approach, conflict can also provide an opportunity to build understanding, bring about change, and promote innovation, says Gabrielle O'Brien.

*"Whenever you're in conflict with someone, there is one factor that can make the difference between damaging your relationship and deepening it. That factor is attitude."*

**William James, US philosopher & psychologist (1842-1910)**

**M**uch has been written by practitioners of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) about the inevitability of conflict in our everyday lives, including our working lives. William James's words of wisdom are a century old, but the human condition means they are as relevant today as they were then. Essentially, we may not avoid conflict but we can influence our response to it when it arises.

In his book *The Crossroads of Conflict*, Kenneth Cloke, director of the Center for Dispute Resolution, explains that all conflicts offer us a choice of responses. The most obvious choice is between a pathway of anger, fear, confrontation and bitterness and a pathway of empathy, acceptance, honesty and mutual respect. The first response comes with a focus on past recriminations; the second focuses on negotiations into the future.

Cloke suggests there is a third possible response to conflict, which leads from the second option. It is one that facilitates an increased awareness, compassion, integrity and learning.

So what relevance does all of this have for organisations, and those tasked with their management? Here at LEADR, we hear from managers on a regular basis that 'people problems' are the ones that take up most of their time and energy, and are often the hardest to resolve. An issue may seem to be resolved only to appear again in a similar but different manifestation.

Paul Hutcheson is a Wellington mediator and facilitator who specialises in 'crucial conversations'. He says the most effective contribution we can make to a difficult

## Speaking from experience

### Diane's story

Diane\*, a senior nurse experiencing conflict with a medical colleague, found that conflict coaching gave her the ability to see the issues more objectively. It did this by helping her deconstruct and then reconstruct the critical event that had led to her seeing a conflict coach.

"I could stand outside the issue and see what was going on for me and understand why I was reacting in the way that I did. It made me stop and reflect."

Diane also felt that she had been able to look beyond the immediate issue and understand more clearly what had led to that point. Diane described her realisation that she might be able to convey her views not with the high-impact destructive cannon she had initially mentally prepared (speaking metaphorically!) but rather with the gentler, yet still effective, water pistol that she eventually took along to a facilitated conversation.

For Diane, the result of her coaching was an ability to enter a facilitated conversation with greater clarity and understanding of what had brought her and her colleague to that point. This meant that the resulting discussion they had was more productive, and she had clarity regarding what she needed to get out of the interaction. Water pistols were never drawn!

Today she talks comfortably of her ability to work alongside her colleague. This is an enormous plus for an organisation that faced the very real prospect of losing one or both employees who were each seen as making a valuable contribution but 'just didn't get along'.

### James's story

James\*, an account director with a client services firm, described a frustrating relationship with a senior manager. What was once a strong collegial relationship had deteriorated into a strained situation characterised by misunderstandings, criticism and differences of opinion.

James described the 'aha' moment he experienced as he worked with his conflict coach. He realised that although he and his colleague may have taken different approaches to issues, they both still had some core values and drivers they could work with.

"Once I understood this, I started consciously thinking about ways in which I could express my needs and views and which would be better understood by my colleague."

James described his shift from the "I can't stand that man!" to an acknowledgement that the way he reacted and responded had affected the situation. From there, he was able to slowly re-build a professional relationship with his colleague. It may not yet be what it once was, but it allows them to function in a civil and friendly manner, and to interact effectively and professionally.

\* Real names not used.

interaction is to do something that is both deceptively simple and yet difficult to accomplish—stepping back and making a supreme effort to understand what someone is trying to communicate.

He urges managers to resist falling into the trap of hastily categorising people as 'mad' or 'bad' as a means of excusing organisations from dealing with challenging workplace interactions.

### ADR for one

Conflict coaching may be part of the answer. Described as "ADR for one" by Canadian lawyer and mediator Cinnie Noble, conflict coaching is increasingly popular as a way for organisations to help individuals prepare for facilitation, mediation and 'difficult conversations', and to improve their capacity to understand their differences.

In its broadest sense, Noble describes conflict coaching as a one-on-one process for helping individuals improve their understanding and skills to manage disputes more effectively.

So is this enough to convince organisations to take an interest in conflict coaching? Perhaps a more persuasive argument, especially in the current economic climate, is the financial cost of conflict.

### Conflict costs

While we may know intuitively that conflict impacts on productivity and morale, research suggests that it has a profound effect on an organisation's bottom line. A recent article in *Entrepreneur*, a US online publication for small businesses, examines some of the hard costs of workplace conflict. It quotes a 2008 study commissioned by CPP Inc—publishers of the Myers Brigg Assessment and the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument—which found that, in 2008, US employees spent 2.8 hours a week dealing with conflict.

This is maybe not such a bad thing if the outcome of these conflicts is better understanding, mutual respect and a focus on future improvements. Sadly, the study found that 25 percent of the employees surveyed sought to avoid conflict by sickness or absence from work. Nearly 10 percent reported that workplace conflict led to project failure, and more than one-third said conflict resulted in someone leaving the company.

This is a high price for any business. When these percentages are extrapolated into the follow-on costs of lost productivity, lost investment in the departed employee, and new recruitment, they provide a powerful incentive for improvement.



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*Finding solutions to conflict*

## Developing career sustainability

It is no longer reasonable to expect to have a career for life, says Kaye Avery. The world of work now requires us to adjust and respond to new ways of doing things and new ways of being.

The concept of 'sustainability' has been losing some of its integrity of late as the term is bandied about quite loosely, in some cases. Not only is the word used in relation to the environment, product consumables and business, but also with respect to 'career'. It's a widely-used term that now expresses our desires for the world, and it is perhaps also a comforting concept for us as we experience constant change and uncertainty.

I am passionately interested in having a 'sustainable' world and have the word in my mission statement, but I'm realising that I need to carefully and properly name what it means for me. And, even then, it is an evolving concept.

We are living in an era where our activities are mostly in reaction to something that we set in place for ourselves in an effort to increase productivity, connectivity and leisure—like constant upgrades, new fangled gadgets, and Facebook! The world spins as we try to respond to increasing pace, and its counterpoint—increasing environmental and social impact.

From a career management perspective, disillusionment abounds as people become suspicious of what a 'sustainable career' really means. We have realised for some time now that no longer is it reasonable to expect to have a career for life. The phenomenon of technological advancement has forced some vocational roles to become obsolete, or so changed that the reasons why people were attracted to the field in the first place are lost. Some examples of this are found in the rapidly changing fields of media, including journalism, publishing and TV production.

There is a good side to all of this, however, and it is about the development of adaptability and personal growth as a career management strategy. The world of work now requires us to adjust and respond to new ways of doing things and new ways of being. The old hierarchical structures consisting of leaders and followers is evolving. Individuals are being called upon to demonstrate greater levels of personal leadership and accountability, which requires greater levels of personal confidence.

However, confidence without conscience is anarchy, as we have recently learned with the fallout from the finance industry melt-down. Similarly, personal power or strength without compassion is folly. We are now more connected via technology, giving greater transparency, which means that actions are scrutinised and the feedback is almost instant.

So, the responsibility now is on the individual to grow and develop personally and professionally in ways that enhance our society. By regular personal review of where we are, and an open questioning of our motives and current interests, we are able to check our alignment. Taking steps to renew our career or way of working in the world encourages a regeneration of our focus and increases personal growth and authenticity.

Sustainability, in the truest sense of the word, is about the ecological balance within a system. Everything we experience is part of a system, whether as a family, a community, a business or the world. In my view, we are at a critical time in history whereby preserving the ecology of our world is paramount. The process of reviewing our personal alignment with our wish for the world is very much part of career management. The greater our alignment, the better we feel about the work we do in the world.

*Kaye Avery is a career coach and the director of Career and Transition Consulting. See [www.career-coach.co.nz](http://www.career-coach.co.nz) for more.*



### Outrage factor

At Victoria University in Melbourne, the employee relations team has identified the 'outrage' factor as the most significant source and symptom of staff interpersonal conflict.

When 'outrage' has been diagnosed within a grievance or complaint, the team recommends conflict coaching (in their case, the CinergyConflict coaching model developed by Cinnie Noble) to address this factor prior to any mediation or facilitated conversation.

Margaret Buchanan, a member of the employee relations team, says in their experience, staff members who undergo conflict coaching before another ADR process to address an interpersonal conflict and/or deal with a complaint, are better able to minimise their own outrage. They are then better positioned to resolve their conflict at mediation. Buchanan says the university is seeing the impact of this approach in a demonstrable reduction in formal dispute and claims to external bodies by staff over the past two years.

Janet Taylor, a Wellington mediator and conflict coach, enjoys the way that conflict coaching gives some control back to the individual who is immersed in the conflict. "It is their process, not your process," says Taylor.

She finds that conflict coaching helps individuals to "unbundle" how they are feeling and responding and, like Buchanan, she believes her clients are better prepared to get more out of facilitation or mediation as a result. Through conflict coaching, she is empowering individuals to manage difficult interactions and opening up their thinking to a range of options.

Lynora Brooke is a chair of The Executive Connection (TEC), an international organisation that provides mentoring and coaching for CEOs, and an ADR practitioner who also trains conflict coaches. She also speaks of the profound benefits for organisations of training senior managers in the skills of conflict coaching.

Brooke describes training to be a conflict coach as not just taking instruction in a process. It offers trainees "an opportunity to practise self-reflection and to increase self-awareness" as they work through their own response to conflict. This means that organisations gain incremental value as their coaches promote and practise a more positive approach to dealing with conflict. This is, in turn, mirrored by those they seek to influence.

Of course, conflict coaching is not a panacea for all ills. It is yet another option in the toolbox for those who seek to make organisations positive places to work, and who see conflict as an opportunity to build understanding, bring about constructive change and promote innovation.

As William James said, "Human beings, by changing the inner attitudes of their minds, can change the outer aspects of their lives." ... and perhaps, we can add, those of their organisations. **et**

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